

Research on the Construction of China's National Image from the Perspective of Critical Pragmatics—Taking the Origin-tracing Issue of COVID-19 at the Regular Press Conference of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an Example

Weixuan Shi, Wanwan Zhong*

Department of English, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

DOI: [10.36348/sijll.2021.v04i09.006](https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2021.v04i09.006)

| Received: 15.08.2021 | Accepted: 22.09.2021 | Published: 25.09.2021

*Corresponding author: Wanwan Zhong

Abstract

The discourse of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons is not only an important means to convey China's attitude, but also one of the important subjects to construct China's national image. The discourse of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons conveys China's value orientation to the whole world. From the perspective of critical pragmatics, this article aims to analyze how the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons construct China's national image in the aspect of discourse with the support of speech act theory. Taking the origin-tracing issue of COVID-19 as an example, the study found that the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons use the performative verbs of assertives, directives and commissives in their discourse to construct a responsible China's national image of seeking truth from facts, acting transparently, respecting for science and actively carrying out cooperation.

Key words: critical pragmatic analysis, COVID-19, speech act theory, China's national image.

Copyright © 2021 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons are press spokespersons assigned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. They speak on behalf of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs; publicize the situation to reporters and answer questions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China now has three spokespersons who are Hua Chunying, Zhao Lijian and Wang Wenbin. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons always show the firm attitude of the country and convey a clear national position in a solemn and serious style. The statements made by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons belong to both institutional discourse and social language. Their statements aim at safeguarding the national interests and shaping the China's national image. The discourse of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons is not only an important means to convey China's attitude, but also an important subject to construct China's national image.

The discourse of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons conveys China's value orientation to the

whole world. Under the guidance of speech act theory, critical pragmatics has an insight into the intention behind the speakers. Based on speech act theory, this article analyzes the positive role of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons' remarks and statements in shaping the China's national image, explores the speech characteristics of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons, and at the same time expands the application scope of speech act theory.

From the perspective of critical pragmatics, this paper aims to collect the remarks and statements of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons at their regular press conferences in November and December 2020, and to explore the construction of China's national image. With the arrival of the last quarter of 2020, COVID-19 wantonly spread in winter, and the COVID-19 variant B.1.1.7 that appeared in Britain in September 2020, the B.1.351 in August in South Africa, and the P.1 in December in Brazil and Japan brought great pressure to the global epidemic prevention work. China's epidemic prevention is not over yet, and epidemic prevention is a long way to go. However, there are always some people who are malicious and

make a big deal out of origin-tracing issues of COVID-19 and make some untrue remarks in an attempt to smear China. As a responsible big country, China uses the most powerful facts to crack down on those false statements. China has always focused on human health, opened information timely, accurately and completely, released epidemic information, strengthened international exchanges and cooperation, and actively shared China's diagnosis and treatment programs and prevention and control experience [1].

CRITICAL PRAGMATICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINA'S NATIONAL IMAGE

Critical Pragmatics and Speech Act Theory

Jacob Mey [2] formally put forward the concept of critical pragmatics in 1993. One of the most important viewpoints of critical pragmatics is to look at the current situation and future of pragmatics in a critical way [3]. Korta [4] put forward three views on critical pragmatics: language is a way of doing things with words; the meaning of the phrase and the meaning of the content of the discourse come from people's intention; the combination of language and other factors enables human beings to achieve the purpose of communication. What's more, the study for critical pragmatics is in the ascendant in China. Xinren Chen [5] believes that critical pragmatics is an important branch of pragmatics, which mainly studies the ideology and value orientation behind language use in social context, aiming to promote appropriate social pragmatic ways and criticize the power suppression, social prejudice, political or economic fraud behind language use and these contextual factors also influence the choice of words [6]. Most of the studies on critical pragmatics in China focus on the use of social pragmatics from the perspective of critical pragmatics. Yonghong Qian [7] studied the pragmatic analysis of fuzzy commercial advertising language and the motivation. Dan Han [8] made a comparative study of the speech acts of refusal and suggestion between China and the United States from the perspective of critical pragmatics. To sum up, domestic scholars have shown great interest in the new perspective of critical pragmatics, and have made beneficial attempts in terms of social language. At the same time, their research also proves the feasibility of critical pragmatics theory and practice.

In critical pragmatic analysis, many scholars usually refer to some theories in this field, such as speech act theory, pragmatic presupposition theory, politeness theory, linguistic adaptation theory, etc. [9]. Speech act theory was first put forward by the philosopher Austin in the 1950s. Then, Searle inherited and developed Austin's theory and promoted the study of speech act theory and discourse meaning to the study of human communication. Searle [10] divided speech acts into five categories, that is, we use language in five

ways. Each specific act has the same implication, but the intensity is different. These five categories are assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. Based on the speech act theory, the critical pragmatic analysis of the speaker's speech can reveal the speaker's intention and deep expression.

Construction of China's National Image

As early as the 1930s and 1940s, western classical realism scholars have studied the national image. Edward [11] focused on morality and public opinion in international relations. Morgan [12] made a detailed exposition of the prestige of the country. Joseph [13] once proposed the theory of soft power, which enabled more scholars to put the national image into the study. The national image is considered as one of the important parts of the country's soft power and scholars have also made further research on the national image of our country from different directions. Yuqian Zhao [14] took the political documentary "*Major-country Diplomacy*" as an example to study the construction and communication of China's major-country image from the perspective of multimodal diplomatic metaphors. It is believed that multimodal diplomatic metaphor, as a visual rhetoric symbol or intersemiotic translation means, is conducive to promoting the dissemination of important concepts such as "major-country image" and the promotion of national image and international discourse power. Xianzhu Si [15] discussed the construction of national image from the perspective of foreign news translation, and believes that in carrying out China's foreign news reporting and constructing news translation texts, it is necessary to justly and confidently establish the consciousness of "I", adhere to the principle of "self-centered", have the courage to speak out the voice of China and shape the image of China.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESPERSONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CRITICAL PRAGMATICS

Corpus Selection

By the end of December 2020, COVID-19 had lasted for nearly a year. Besides the panic caused by COVID-19 at the very beginning, the COVID-19 was effectively prevented and controlled in China in a few months. China's epidemic prevention work has set a good example for the world, and vaccine research is also in steady progress. However, the epidemic prevention work in some countries is not so satisfactory, and there are many problems in vaccine development. Gradually, some untrue remarks that discredit China have been magnified. As a "microphone" to convey China's voice to the outside world, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons, with a practical and realistic attitude, clarify the untrue remarks of the so-called "facts" of others to the world and sets up the image of China as a responsible big country. At the press conference held in November and

December 2020, there were as many as 12 original-tracing issues about the COVID-19, among which the most ones were the progress of the COVID-19 original-tracing. The language materials of this article are all from the English version of the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and there are a total of 2755 words about the original-tracing issue of COVID-19.

Original-tracing Issues of COVID-19 and Critical Pragmatic Analysis of the Construction of China's National Image

The original-tracing issues of COVID-19 have always been a relatively concerned issue all over the world, because finding the root of the virus spread means a big step forward in the global epidemic prevention work. Unfortunately, it is still impossible to identify the source of dissemination of COVID-19. Although the COVID-19 outbreak first occurred in the Hua'nan seafood market of Wuhan, with the advancement of the research on the origin of COVID-19, more and more evidence shows that the source of COVID-19 was not in Wuhan, China. However, there are still some false statements of "China virus" in an attempt to discredit China. Based on the speech act theory, this article analyzes the response of the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons to original-tracing issues of COVID-19 and analyzes the positive image of China's by the spokespersons' discourse.

The Image of a Responsible Big Country with Transparent and Realistic Actions

The following is an example about original-tracing issues of COVID-19 by Indian Prasar Bharati reporter at Hua Chunying's regular press conference on November 30, 2020.

Example 1

Prasar Bharati: WHO executive director Ryan also said at the same press conferences that WHO intends to send team to the Wuhan seafood market where the virus first emerged. Will China allow the WHO team to visit the Wuhan seafood market? Is there any itinerary finalized for the team? When will they visit Wuhan?

Hua Chunying: Like I said, China has been open, transparent and responsible on origin tracing. We are among the first countries to cooperate with the WHO. The WHO also gave us information about the progress in the research on COVID-19 origin tracing. Our cooperation is steadily advancing with close communication and exchange.

As I also stressed, for many times we've read and heard news worldwide on the dates and locations of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows the virus broke out at multiple locations worldwide, which requires international research and cooperation by scientists across the globe. We hope all countries can

adopt a positive attitude like China has done on working with the WHO to trace the origin of the virus. Regarding the details you asked about, however, I have no further information for you at the moment.

The question raised by the reporter of Prasar Bharati pays close attention to the original-tracing issues of COVID-19, which indicates that the eyes of the world are focused on whether China can make a further breakthrough in tracing the origin of COVID-19. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying often used performative verbs of assertives, such as "said", "stress" and "show", when answering the reporter's question. The illocutionary point of the speech acts named assertive, is to commit the speaker to something's being the case, to the truth of what have been said. In other words, when performing an illocutionary act of assertive, the speaker is making a statement of giving a description which he himself believes to be true. Stating, believing, swearing, hypothesizing are among the most typical of the representative [16]. First of all, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying replied with the verb "said" showing that the World Health Organization (WHO) is investigating the origin of COVID-19 in the seafood market in Wuhan, which indicates that China has always been open, transparent and responsible in tracing the origin of the COVID-19. The performative verb "said" strongly conveys the latest progress of the tracing of COVID-19 in China that the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson has mastered. It also indicates that the Chinese government has responded quickly, actively carried out international exchanges and cooperation, and never prevaricate on this issue. Then, Hua Chunying used the two performative verbs "stress" and "show" to emphasize that COVID-19's origin has been reported many times in many locations around the world, which requires international research and cooperation of global scientists. The word "stress" is more to convey that China is willing to actively carry out cooperation and research with the WHO, and earnestly hopes that China can reach an agreement with the WHO on the tracing work of COVID-19, so as to overcome the epidemic at an early date. And the performative verb "show" objectively indicates that the Chinese government, with a practical and realistic attitude, promptly publishes the latest progress made by the WHO and China in the field of traceability, and seeks cooperation with the WHO and the international community. From the perspective of critical pragmatics, the above performative verbs that the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson used construct the image of the Chinese Government acting transparently, seeking truth from facts and responsibility. The Chinese government supports and cooperates with the work of WHO and actively promotes the progress of the COVID-19 traceability research work. And the Chinese Government will work with the international community to contribute to global

cooperation on virus tracing and fighting, so as to better prevent and respond to the epidemic.

The Image of a Big Country Respecting for Science and Actively Developing Cooperation

What and where the source of the COVID-19 is has always been the most concerned problem. By December 2020, COVID-19 broke out for nearly a year, but people still could not find out what the source of COVID-19 is. Although COVID-19 first broke out in Hua'nán seafood market in Wuhan, China, the existing research shows that China is not the first place COVID-19 appeared. Therefore, the "source address" of the COVID-19 is increasingly touching people's hearts. In November and December 2020, there were 6 questions about whether COVID-19 source was in China or elsewhere. The following example is the Reuters question on COVID-19's source area at Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons Zhao Lijian's regular press conference on November 17, 2020.

Example 2

Reuters: The coronavirus may have been circulating in Italy since September 2019, according to a study released by the National Cancer Institute (INT) in Milan. Some believe that the virus had been spreading overseas before the epidemic broke out in Wuhan. Do you have any comment?

Zhao Lijian: We have seen and heard constant international reports of where and when COVID-19 first broke out. This once again shows that the origin of the virus is a complex scientific issue, and international scientific research cooperation should be carried out globally by scientists to get a better understanding of the animal reservoirs and transmission route of the virus, with the aim to better guard against risks in the future and protect the safety and health of people of all countries. Origin tracing is an ongoing process that may involve many countries. We hope that all countries will adopt a positive attitude and strengthen cooperation with the WHO to advance the work on origin tracing.

China will continue participating in global scientific research in tracing the origin and transmission route of the virus, and work with the rest of the international community to contribute to the global cooperation on fighting COVID-19 and other viruses.

The Reuters reporter sharply asked about China's position and viewpoint. Based on the premise of respect for science, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian has always emphasizes that it isn't scientific to simply say the COVID-19 originating in China or other countries. In Zhao Lijian's response, he often uses the performative verbs of commissives. Commissive illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action, i.e. when speaking the speaker puts himself under a certain obligation. Promising, undertaking, vowing are the

most typical cases [16]. Zhao Lijian used the performative verb "will" in the last sentence to express China's attitude, that is, as the largest developing country in the world, China always gives play to a humanitarian spirit, actively strengthened international exchanges and cooperation, and made its own contribution to promoting global epidemic prevention. On the other hand, Zhao Lijian also used directives speech act verbs to euphemistically urge countries to actively carry out international exchanges and cooperation. Directives are attempted by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. Inviting, suggesting, requesting advising, warning, threatening, ordering are all specific instances of this class [16]. Zhao Lijian uses the performative verb "hope" to euphemistically express the wish that all countries can take a positive attitude, strengthen cooperation with WHO and promote the work of COVID-19 traceability. Moreover, Zhao Lijian repeatedly stressed that virus traceability is a complex scientific issue, and scientists should carry out international scientific research and cooperation on a global scale to promote the understanding of the animal hosts and transmission routes of the virus, so as to better prevent possible future risks and protect the life safety and health of people all over the world, rather than accountability. From the perspective of critical pragmatics, the above performative verbs that Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian used indicate that China has everything in good order and well arranged to assist the international community and WHO in the COVID-19's origin tracing. He also urged all countries in the world to carry out international exchanges and cooperation, and based on the respect for science and facts, and carried out traceability of COVID-19 in an orderly way, which constructs the image of a great power that respects for science and actively develops cooperation.

As mentioned above, on the issue of tracing the origin of the COVID-19, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons aim to state the facts and urge all countries to actively carry out international exchanges and cooperation, so as to well prevent and deal with the epidemic. Therefore, they use more performative verbs of assertives, directives and commissives to express China's position and viewpoint. However, the Chinese Ministry Foreign spokespersons did not use the performative verbs of expressives and declarations in their utterances. The writer thinks this has a lot to do with the types of questions asked by reporters.

CONCLUSION

There is a long way to go to build China's national image. During the epidemic period, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China has faced the attention of the international community. The Chinese government insisted on information transparency, responded to rumors and malicious attacks in a timely manner, and opened

overseas media interviews in an orderly manner. COVID-19 traceability issue itself is a complex scientific problem. Scientists should conduct international scientific research and cooperation around the world to promote understanding of the host and transmission routes of animal viruses so as to better promote global epidemic prevention. From the perspective of critical pragmatics, it can be found that the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons often use performative verbs of assertives, dierctives and commissives to construct the image of a responsible big country, which is practical and realistic, transparent, scientific and cooperative. This is bound to have a positive effect on the construction of the China's national image.

REFERENCE

1. Fei, K. (2020). National Image Construction in Epidemic Prevention and Control. *The Press*, 15; 94-95.
2. Mey, J. (1993). *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
3. Sahib, W. (2020). A Critical Pragmatic Study of Racism as Conceptualized in the Glorious Quran [J], *31*(2), 8-9.
4. Kapa, K. (2011). *Critical Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Xingren, C. (2009). Critical Pragmatics: Aims, Objectives and Method. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, *249*(12), 10-11.
6. Al-Hindawi, F.H., & Mehdi Mohammed, W. S. (2018). Towards an Analytical Model in Critical Pragmatics. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*: 9.
7. Yonghong, Q. (2018). Socio-psychological Mechanism Underlying Misleading Vague Language in Advertisement: A Critical Pragmatic Analysis. *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies*, *09*; 44-48+77-78.
8. Dan, H., Fengguang, L., & Yaochen, D. (2020). A Contrastive Study of Chinese and American Diplomatic Refusal Speech Acts from the Perspective of Critical Pragmatics. *Foreign Languages Research*, *179*(1), 19-24.
9. Xingren, C. (2013). *Critical Pragmatics: Study on Public Discourse*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
10. Searle, J. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Carr, E. H., Cox, M. (1946). The twenty years' crisis, 1919-1939: an introduction to the study of international relations. London: Macmillan.
12. Morgenthau, H.J. (2005). *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Peking University Press.
13. Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001). Future of the American Pacifer. *Foreign Aff*, *80*; 46.
14. Yuqian, Z. (2020). The Construction and Communication of China's Major-Country Image from the Perspective of Multimodal Diplomatic Metaphors: A Case Study of the Political Documentary "Major-Country Diplomacy". *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, *41*(03); 61-70.
15. Xianzhu, S. (2020). Translation of Foreign News and Construction of National Image. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, *43*(05); 118-127+160.
16. Weidong, D. (2018). *A New Concise Course in Linguistics for Students of English*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Education Press.